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THE ADEQUACY OF HIGH SCHOOL PREPARATION ON THE ADULT ADJUSTMENT OF LEARNING DISABLED YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

Ninety learning disabled (LD), 19 behavior disordered (BD) and 37 regular class (RC) graduates of greater Chicago high schools were surveyed to determine what, if any, difficulties they were experiencing after leaving high school. Results indicated that the LD's required additional training in job specific skills, instruction in writing checks, and felt unprepared to cope with "everyday living". LD's reported that classes in mathematics, English, special and vocational education were most helpful for coping with life after high school. LD's and BD's envisioned themselves as living in the same

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location ten years from the present where as RC's did not. Of added interest was the finding that parents of LD's appeared to have received less education when compared to BD and RC counterparts. Implications for further research and for high school curriculum are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The preponderance of available research in the area of learning disabilities has primarily focused on the school aged learner (Lerner,1981). Little is known about the adjustment concerns of learning disabled (LD) adults. However, if learning disabilities result from variations in neurological functioning (Orton,1937), perceptual deficits (Rosner,1979), diet (Feingold,1975), allergic response (Rees,1973), problems with meta-cognitive organization (Knight-Arist & Reid,1979; Hresko & Reid,1981) or other causes (see Lerner,1981); then it is reasonable to assume that the LD adult may experience adjustment difficulties arising from the nature of the disability. Knowledge of such adjustment difficulties in the LD adult would possess import for the planning and implementation of curriculum

in special education (Meyers & Messerer, 1981).

The few available studies which have attended to the adult adjustment of LD's are plagued by various methodological flaws which render their results questionable. A key deficiency in these studies is the failure of many researchers to include a "normal" or "average" control group. Inclusion of such a group is necessary in order to establish a referent of typical experience for "normal" graduates by which to determine the magnitude of LD adjustment concerns. It maybe, for example, that none of the graduates locate jobs, be they "normal", LD or behavior disordered (BD)!

Other methodological concerns include experimenter bias (i.e. the educators of students also serve as experimenters; see Rogan, 1976; Silver, 1969); the use of atypical populations, such as those found in remedial clinics (Falfard & Haubrich, 1980); Menker, 1967) and failures to control for sociocultural status (see Silver, 1969), a critical factor with regard to economic opportunity.

Meyers and Messerer (1981) authored a pilot study designed to circumvent many of the pitfalls described above. Meyers and Messerer compared the adult adjustment of 12 LD's to that of 9 BD's and 23 "regular class" controls. Each of the 3 samples had graduated high school two to three years earlier. Meyers and Messerer's results indicated specific adjustment difficulties in the areas of vocational

activity, social adjustment, and daily living skills. Meyers and Messerer cautioned that their results were of a pilot nature, and as such, should not be considered final. Corroboration by future large N studies was recommended. This paper is a report of one such project.

Method

Subjects

The subject pool included 55 LD, 19 BD and 37 regular class (RC) graduates from 5 suburban Chicago school districts. An additional sample of 35 LD graduates from the Chicago Public Schools was also included, yielding a total LD sample of 90. The mean age for each of the samples were as follows: LD=20.28 years, BD=20.63 years and RC=20.38 years. Eighteen of 90 LD's, 4 of 19 BD's and 21 of 37 RC's were female. The mean elapsed time from graduation for each of the samples was 2.69 years for the LD's, 3.0 years for the BD's and 2.97 years for the RC's. The LD sample included subjects from lower, middle and upper income geographical locations as reflected by the populations serviced by the included school districts.

Procedure

A 53 item questionnaire was developed and administered to high school graduates over the telephone by representatives of the participating school districts. The content of the questionnaire included items related to demographics (e.g. marital status, living arrangements), family background, adequacy of high school preparation, current job satisfaction, interpersonal relationships at work, post-secondary training, use of leisure time, and social adjustment (e.g. friendships, dating). Administrators for the questionnaire were recruited and then trained in a special session. In some cases the administrators had been the teachers of the interviewed high school graduates. Meyers and Messerer(1981) found that graduates of special education programs were more willing to respond to questions regarding their previous high school experience, if the interviewer had been their teacher. In no case did a teacher interview more than ten of her previous students, nor did these teachers participate in the analysis of data. Questionnaires were returned to the experimenters, at which time they were coded and analyzed. Items were of the "nominal" form and group responses were tabulated as frequency counts; chi-square analysis was deemed appropriate and undertaken.

Results

The results of this study form three clusters of interest: (1) the education of the parents of the LD respondents, (2) the high school preparation of the LD's and (3) LD adult adjustment.

Education of Parents

The results indicate that a tendency exists for LD parents to have less formal education as a group when compared to BD and RC counterparts (Education of fathers:chi-square = 10.12, DF = 6, P = .12; Education of mothers;chi-square = 15.38, DF = 6, P< .02). For example, 26
% of LD fathers graduated from college compared to 42% of BD fathers and 49% of RC fathers. A similar pattern for LD mothers was also apparent. Fourteen percent of LD mothers graduated from college compared to 21% of BD mothers and 41% of RC mothers.

High School Preparation

A variety of questions related to high school preparation appeared on the questionnaire; however, only several proved of interest. One question sought to determine which high school courses were of greatest help after leaving high school. Respondents were told they could indicate one or two choices. A total of 99 LD, 21 BD and 51 RC responses were obtained. (Responses which were selected less than 15% of the time are not reported). The LD's indicated that

math instruction (22% of the 99 LD responses selected Math) as being the greatest help, closesly followed by Special Education (21%), English (19%) and Vocational Preparation (18%). BD's indicated that Vocational Preparation was of the greatest help (38% of 21 BD responses) followed by Special Education (24%). RC's indicated that English and Mathematics were of equal importance (24% each) followed by Business and Vocational Preparation, also of equal importance (18% each). These results would appear to suggest that Special Education as well as Vocational Preparation are recollected by both LD's and BD's as significant factors in their high school preparation.

Related to the adequacy of high school preparation is the ability to obtain a job, or not, based upon requisite skills. When respondents were asked if they were ever unable to obtain a job due to a lack of training or skill development, 34% of the LD's, 47% of the BD's and 51% of the RC's said yes. The most frequent explanation offered by both LD's and RC's was lack of job specific skills. The most frequent explanation offered by BD's was the need for a college education.

Would the LD's seek additional training for skills that would help them with their job? Forty-eight percent indicated yes. More specifically, 34% of the LD respondents to this item were planning to obtain job specific or technical training. Training in Business was the most frequent BD (26%) and RC(25%) responses. In addition, 16% of

the BD's indicated they would seek a college degree. (Other responses to this item were less than 15%). This item and its predecessor, reported above, appear to indicate the need for specific vocational training in special education programs at the high school level.

We have examined the adequacy of high school preparation related to job performance. However, there are many other aspects of adult adjustment which are experienced upon leaving high school. Twenty-one percent of the LD's surveyed indicated that high school did not prepare them for "everyday living". Only 6 % of BD and 10% of RC participants made this same response. More will be said about this finding in the paragraphs below devoted to adult adjustment.

The final result of interest regarding high school preparation is the item which asked participants to indicate what they might do differently if starting high school over again. The most frequent response across all groups was "study harder": LD-50%; BD-53%; RC-48%. The second most frequent response was "take different courses": LD-23%; BD-16%; RC-35%.

Adjustment to Adult Life

It was mentioned earlier that 21% of LD's indicated that high school was not able to prepare them adequately for everyday living. Results of several additional items on the questionnaire helped to

identify several areas of concern. A disproportionate percentage of LD's (58%), as compared to BD's (32%) and RC's)33%) pay their bills with cash rather than checks or money orders (Chi-square = 14.8, dF = 6, P = .02). Thirty-six percent of LD's pay their bills with checks or money orders and 6% do not pay bills. Checks or money orders are used by 68% of BD's and 56% of RC's. Eleven percent of RC's indicated they do not pay bills. This finding indicates the need for increased training in the area of home and personal finances.

A second finding of interest related to adult adjustment indicated that the RC's envisioned themselves as relocating to a new geographic location within a 10 year period (43%). Only 5% of LD's and 11% of BD's shared this same vision. This is a curious result which reflects differences in future orientation between special education and regular class graduates. Locus of control may be one variable operative here. This finding merits further investigation.

Discussion

The results of the study present a host of additional questions for further research, as well as implications for the education of high school LD pupils. We will begin first with a brief discussion of implications for future research.

Implications For Future Research

One implication for future research stems from the finding that in this study, LD parents had received less education than BD or RC counterparts. Verification of this result in other geographical areas utilizing a design which would elicit the causative component might shed light on the origins of learning disabilities. Might the causative component be, for example, genetic, or perhaps attributable to specific child rearing practices (Feuerstein, 1979) or some other explanation?

A second implication for future research is the report by 21% of the LD's that high school did not prepare them for "everyday living". What specifically are they unprepared to do besides the difficulty they apparently experience with the keeping of checkbooks? Lerner (1981) reports, for example, research that demonstrates LD's may experience difficulties in social situations. We have for too long only attended to the "academic" needs of the learning disabled. They may experience great difficulty in other areas of functioning.

A third area of interest for future research involves the result that only 5% of LD's compared to 43% of RC's indicated a projected move to a new location within a ten year period. Does this result reflect differences in cognitive organization, locus of control, realistic constraints, or some other explanation?

Implications For The Schools

The results indicate that both LD and BD pupils felt that what they learned in special education as well as vocational education classes was useful in their post-school experiences. However, LD's reported a lack of job specific skills for which they were prepared to seek additional training. Although career and vocational education are slowly finding their way into the LD curriculum at the high school level, the need for greater and more specific job training is an apparent need. Curriculum that focuses exclusively on the "remediation" of academic deficiencies most likely fails to prepare the LD for what he will need to be able to do in order to survive in the adult world. LD's have difficulty using checks and have indicated that they are ill prepared to deal with "everyday living". To further illustrate this point, the authors recall a visit to a suburban Chicago high school where an 11th grade LD pupil was being taught basic addition facts in a resource setting. The authors inquired why not let the pupil use a calculator as the pupil had not learned addition facts in 12 years of schooling and would soon have to survive in the world. The response of the resource teacher was that school policy did not permit the use of calculators!

Clearly, the results of this project point to the need to reexamine the curriculum offered to the LD student at the high school

level. This statement is supported by the fact that LD's experience adult adjustment difficulties for which the schools have not prepared these pupils to cope. Undoubtedly, the schools are not aware of the shape and scope of the problem. It is for this reason that the authors challenge every school district throughout the country to undertake their own replication of this study!

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